

Journal Writing: Example of A Combined Reflection on:

- Frye. "Oppression."
- MacKinnon. "Consciousness Raising"

In the first line of Catherine Mackinnon's iconic text, *Towards a Feminist State* (1989), the writer informs the reader that this book was eighteen years in the making. For the non-mathematically inclined, this places the origins of Mackinnon's text in 1971. Likewise, in the preface of Marilyn Frye's *The Politics of Reality* (1983), Frye dedicates her most widely read essay, "Oppression", to the students who took a feminist philosophy course that she originated at the remarkably early date of 1974. "The oppression lecture", the writer explains, was delivered "at the beginning of that course... [as] something of a Rite of Passage" (vii).

MacKinnon and Frye's extended writing processes resulted in texts that, to paraphrase MacKinnon, can almost be said to be coauthored by the writers' early 1970's and (then, contemporary) 1980's selves (ix). And, although there are moments in either text that, even ten years into our new century, stand the test of time, there are also moments that feel exceedingly dated. Furthermore, it is difficult (if not impossible), as a contemporary reader, to tease out what has become dated since publication versus what was already dated upon publication. But, that doesn't mean I can't try. In this section of my journal entry, I will analyze these texts in relation to the evolving feminist context(s) (1971-1989) in comparison to today. I will conclude by arguing the continued relevance and significance of these texts, as historically situated primary texts and valuable and influential theoretical texts.

Both essays have a jargon free, dead serious tone that seems to owe most to the rhetoric of the feminist moment of the 1980s. For instance, consider the language of Frye's reading of the culturally ingrained ritual of men opening doors for women. I'll quote from the text at length:

The gallant gestures have no practical meaning. Their meaning is symbolic. The door-opening and similar services provided are services which really are needed by people who are for one reason or another incapacitated – unwell, burdened with parcels, etc. So the message is that women are incapable. The detachment of the acts from the concrete realities of what women need and do not need is a vehicle for the message that women's actual needs and interests are unimportant or irrelevant. Finally, these gestures imitate the behavior of servants toward masters and thus mock women, who are in most respects the servants and caretakers of men. The message of the false helpfulness of male gallantry is female dependence, the invisibility or insignificance of women, and contempt for women.

In the above quoted paragraph, Frye is remarkably decisive about her speculative and interpretative reading of this ritual. Indeed, there is not one single qualifying statement or word --e.g. perhaps, could, maybe, seems, I think or I'd argue-- that indicates doubt.

However, as opposed to the epoch-appropriate austere polemics of the texts, the actual content of the essays often implicitly or explicitly harkens back to early moments. For example, although Frye mentions race and class in passing throughout the text, her disclaimers are not sharp enough to prevent obscuring significant relational differences (which, by 1983, had been theorized by Black and Third World feminists). Indeed, at some moments, Frye's references to race and class seem to function as little more than vague gestures or politically correct place holders. For instance, Frye mentions that the aforementioned door opening ritual is "widespread across classes and races". However, her ensuing race/class neutral directive --"look at a scene of two people approaching a door. The male steps slightly ahead and opens the door. The male holds the door open while the female glides through"-- reminds me of a line from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. "[The male] is white", Morrison explains, "and we know he is white because nobody says so". I'd argue that if we imagine men, of various races and classes, opening doors for women, of various races and classes, the symbolic meanings shift considerably. Thus, Frye's refusal to allow room for alternative interpretations is a sloppy moment in her argument.

Turning my attention to MacKinnon's text, the writer uses consciousness raising groups as her framing focus even though consciousness raising groups were not really part of the popular/academic feminist discourse in 1989. Notably, the writer attempts to circumvent this, by writing: "As feminist method and practice, consciousness raising is not confined to groups explicitly named organized for that purpose. In fact, consciousness raising as discussed here was often not practiced in consciousness-raising groups" (84).

However, this intervention fails to answer what form a consciousness raising group, under any name, would take in 1989 (not to mention 2010). Given that, by the late eighties, the priorities of the dominant feminist discourse was shifting. (Pre-Judith Butler) Riley, Scott, Alcoff and others were beginning to theorize the existence

of an un-resolvable tension between the political necessity of the category of 'women' and the instability and impossibility of this category. This problematic transcended and refused the arguments and solutions posited by most feminists in the 1970s-1980s, who presupposed the (biological) category of women and sought to break the bonds of oppression collectively as women (or sometimes through a coalition model of politics, e.g. Combahee River Collective). Thus, is (/was) it politically necessary to have women only spaces where consciousness raising can take place? And, who gets included and excluded from the category of women?

I'm genuinely asking both questions without irony. In recent years, there has been a reemergence of theoretical work, by writers on the cutting edge, which considers spaces that exist in resistance to the hegemonic culture e.g. Ann Cvetkovich or Judith Halberstam's investigation of lesbian (and/or queer) spaces as well as Cvetkovich's more recent work, which focuses on women's spaces. This work (implicitly or explicitly) argues that regardless of how these identities are produced and maintained, these spaces have been sites upon which vibrant and dynamic politics, cultures and arts have been created. Therefore, it might be worth re-visiting MacKinnon's text in light of this.

In conclusion, while MacKinnon's analysis of the power of women's only space is due for a critical renaissance, Fyre's essay is as powerful (if, at times, problematic) as the day it was written. It's strength, I think, is in the writer's lack of lofty ambition. She is trying to prove what she and I know is a commonsensical point, and is trying to do so in a way that will be accessible to undergraduate students. **"Isn't it strange that any of us should have been confused and mystified about such a simple thing?"** she asks, in bold, to conclude her essay.